

COMMUNICATIONS

FOLKLORE STUDIES A Curriculum Proposal

The following is a proposal for a folklore program which I offered to the curriculum committee at the College of St. Benedict, in St. Joseph, Minnesota, last spring. Its chief virtue is that it worked. I am finishing my M. A. and wanted a job in the areawhere I live, so I went to the dean of St. Ben's and told her I would like to teach folklore there. (They have never offered a folklore course.) She suggested I write a proposal and submit it in duplicate copies to the curriculum committee, who subsequently adopted the whole program and hired me as a full-time professor, in an independent department of Folklore.

I offer the proposal here in no way as a model or a method, but merely as an example of an approach to the job-hunting situation. Since it had to be short, and since it is addressed to non-folklorists, it is very general, and perhaps naive. I think it is important to remember, however, that in proposing to teach undergraduates, we must speak to undergraduate objectives. I couched my proposal in the terms of general education, not preparation to be a professional folklorist.

Some ideas about getting a job teaching folklore that came out of my experience:

1. It pays to approach colleges that do not now offer folklore, but you must be prepared to sell them on it.
2. The appeal must be made in terms of undergraduate educational objectives.
3. It helps if you know the area where the college is located, and something about the college's particular character, such as the background of the students, its educational principles, etc., and can make your proposal in their terms. You can learn a lot from a college catalog.
4. It helps if you happen to live near a college that has money and an open-minded curriculum committee!

The Proposal to St. Ben's

I propose that the College of St. Benedict include in its curriculum some courses in folklore. In order to demonstrate its value, I think it is necessary first to describe folklore as an academic discipline, then to relate it to St. Benedict's students. I shall also outline some specific courses and summarize my own background.

The study of folklore began in the nineteenth century with the philologists in Germany, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, and with the antiquarians in England, ardent amateur scholars such as Andrew Lang and Sir Walter Scott. Folklore, so named in 1846, quickly became an established academic discipline in many European universities, but in England and America it was caught up with the development of anthropology. Stith Thompson at Indiana University first put folklore on a solid independent footing in America, establishing the Folklore Institute and contributing two of the basic reference books that make international folklore study possible: the Aarne-Thompson Tale-Type Index and the Motif-Index of Folklore.

Graduate programs are now offered at Indiana, Berkeley, Pennsylvania, and Texas, among others, and folklore is offered as an undergraduate major at Harvard and Indiana. The graduates of these programs are in museum or research work or are teaching folklore, sometimes in combination with languages, anthropology, literature, or history, at colleges and universities in every state.

The folklorist's contribution to knowledge is to study the products of human imagination that are not recorded but are transmitted orally. These form a large body of tradition that is very important to the life of any group, but has been outside the realm of academic study until recently. The materials of folklore fall into four categories: oral literature, which includes myths, folktales, legends, proverbs, riddles; material culture, or the objects and processes of daily living; social folk custom, which includes festival celebrations, recreations, and superstitions; and the performing folk arts of song, dance, and theatre. The operant word in regard to all the categories is tradition, and a tradition develops in any group of people who all have a common trait or interest. Thus the materials of folklore can be as varied as, for example, the creation myths of the Australian aborigines, the quilting bees of Minnesota housewives, and the joke parodies of the Women's Liberation Movement.

The methods the folklorist may use to study the materials of tradition include fieldwork, annotation, comparison, analysis, and interpretation. The fieldworker uses a tape recorder, camera, tape measure, and notebooks to collect the tradition he finds. His interest is not so much in the intrinsic value of each piece--which might be a recipe, place name legend, lullaby or barn measurement--as in the information about people that can be culled from a study of his materials in relation to many others. A collector must learn the history of an area, make community contacts, develop rapport with informants, and manage his recording equipment--all requiring independent initiative that makes fieldwork a valuable learning experience for a student.

After collecting, the fieldworker must annotate each item with the reference works on previously collected folklore to establish its traditional nature; and he may compare it with other versions as the first step in interpretation. Analysis and interpretation are the basics of folklore study, and it is here that the folklorist, in addition to specific folklore techniques, may use abilities gained in other fields. Folklore may be studied in terms of its form and style, its psychological meaning, its cultural function, its geographical distribution with a search for its place of origin, or its historical or sociological significance.

Since folklore is the natural, unselfconscious expression of the values and ideals of a people--though often in symbolic form--when it is carefully analyzed and interpreted, it adds a valuable dimension to our understanding of human nature and culture.

While folklore essentially shares the long-term goals of the other humanistic studies, it also has some practical applications. Specialists in Indian folklore have been called on to substantiate oral treaties in governmental disputes. A public health program in Chicago used folklorists to communicate with Appalachian immigrants. The women had been refusing pre-natal health care, but accepted it when they could be assured it would not violate their deeply-held folk beliefs. Collections of urban black folklore have helped white Americans to understand the black situation, and have been important in the recent recognition of black English.

While I hope that I've shown the value of folklore as a discipline, that alone may not justify teaching it at the College of St. Benedict. I do think folklore has some specific values, even for the student who takes one course and hasn't

the faintest likelihood of becoming a professional folklorist.

I have already mentioned some of the values of doing fieldwork, and I feel that a folklore program at St. Ben's should include a fieldwork requirement. The place to begin collecting folklore is in one's own family or hometown, and it is exciting to see how studying folklore opens a student's eyes to the values of her surroundings and background--which can be very self-affirming. The recognition of the role folklore plays in a culture creates a sense of participation: a culture is not only the product of the writers, scientists, and political leaders, but of all the people through their participation in the tradition.

Reading the work that has been done in folklore interpretation, along with texts from other countries, helps a student to understand the depth of humanity of the most primitive peoples, the world view of groups very different from his own, and the universality of the basic human concerns.

At St. Ben's a folklore program should begin with an introductory course that would be appropriate for freshmen as well as older students. The organization would at first be by genres to facilitate an early start in local fieldwork, and along with some reading--such as The Study of Folklore edited by Alan Dundes and Folklore and Folklife edited by Richard Dorson--the requirement for the course would be an annotated collection. (The basic references needed are available in the three local college libraries.) The second semester would deal specifically with American folklore and focus even more closely on the local area.

For upperclass students I would like to offer a seminar in interdisciplinary folklore. Class discussions could cover some of the most exciting work that has been done in folklore analysis, and each student could do a folklore project related to her major field of study to present to the class. There is a wide array of possible projects: for example, analyzing statistically the incidence of local barn or house styles; making a film of craftsmen at work or holiday customs; finding the folklore influences in a piece of literature; reconstructing a local historical event through oral tradition; collecting folk songs or data on musical instruments; hunting for remnants of German folk expressions in the language.

More advanced, coordinated fieldwork projects would be possible during an interim session. Folklore collectors have recently found that working as teams is very productive, and such a project could either be done here or, perhaps in the future, at a field station in another state or abroad.

I would like to start an archive of folklore collected in Minnesota, especially the Stearns County area. Students' collections could be organized and filed to be easily accessible, and eventually could be published. Since there has been very little collecting done here, the materials would be a valuable addition to folklore scholarship. This in itself would have appeal for students, I think--in how many fields can a student's efforts make a real scholarly contribution? The Central Minnesota Historical Center, which is sponsored by the State Historical Society and funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, is interested in a folklore archive as an addition to their materials, and might be able to help pay for the time of an archivist.

(I included here a summary of my own background and interests in folklore, including the fieldwork I have been doing in the local area. Of course I also submitted separately my placement file, letters, etc.)

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